

12/10/76

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Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Exemption(s):

Declassify: ☐ In Part ☒ In Full☒ Classify as ☐ Extend as ☐ Downgrade to

Date Declassify on Reason

DATE: December 10, 1976

SUBJECT: Conversation with Papal Nuncio

PARTICIPANTS: Monseñor Pio Laghi, Papal Nuncio

Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

Mr. Wayne S. Smith, Political Counselor

PLACE: Papal Nuncio's Residence

COPIES TO: AMB, DCM, ARA-Mr. Bray

I explained to the Nuncio that I had come to Argentina in an effort to understand what we regarded as one of the most complex, ambiguous and difficult situations in Latin America. I knew him to be a thoughtful and informed observer of that situation and I was therefore interested in his view of what was going on in Argentina as well as his observations concerning Church-State relations.

The Nuncio began by saying one could not comprehend the Argentine situation by using a North American or European optic. Real democracy, as we know it, has never existed here--and certainly did not prior to the March 24 change of government; the traditional political cement in the country has been demagoguery. The Armed Forces had no choice but to take power and they were supported in that by virtually the whole nation.

The Church had been hopeful that the quiet military takeover (which was not a coup in the real sense of the word), with its moderate pronouncements, would mark a turning point toward a more hopeful future. Since then, however, the Church's optimism (as well as that of other sectors) has come to be conditioned by serious reservations. These are (in the order in which he articulated them):

- a) Who is the boss? With the government divided into a tripartite system, or arrangement, no one individual seems to be responsible or charged with final authority. The Navy blames mistakes on the Army and vice

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versa. Further, the Church has the distinct impression that the central authorities cannot control, or at least have little control over, their own security forces. If they do not, who does? The problem is the create a "monopoly" of force, a monopoly which may be subject to greater control than the presently fragmented security services.

- b) Lack of discernment. Many officers now see Communism everywhere. Everything is colored red. To them, anyone who defends human rights, or takes a view in the least contrary to their own, is a subversive, to be dealt with accordingly. The necessary balance is simply not there.
- c) Burden on the Workers. The economic program is placing a heavy burden on the working class and is causing a good deal of suffering--suffering to which the government has as yet been unresponsive.

The Nuncio then commented that the Church's greatest concern is implicit in the first two reservations mentioned: human rights. That there are serious excesses and violations there can be no doubt. The Church cannot but be concerned and the government must realize it. What attitude can the latter expect the Church to take when its priests disappear, or are picked up and tortured, or even killed.

The picture was not altogether black, however, the Nuncio remarked. Good progress is being made against the terrorists and the military are optimistic as to their final defeat.

When I asked if that optimism were well founded, the Nuncio replied, "in part." The ERP, he felt, was pretty well destroyed. The Montoneros, however, were another matter. Militarily, they had suffered reverses, but they had an ideology and were busily at work in the factories. Failure on the government's part to respond to growing social problems and to curb the excesses of its security forces could lead to a popular reaction--and this would play into the hands of the Montoneros. The disgruntled might begin to turn to them.

The Church's position in all this, the Nuncio said, is to support the moderates in the government, led by President Videla. Indeed, he said, he was convinced Videla is a basically decent, sincere man. Clearly, moreover, the chances were that what might replace him would be far worse; he believes an immediate successor government would inevitably represent the far right, but that following a inevitable popular reaction, the country would swing radically to the left. Thus, it made sense to support the "best available" in order to prevent "the worst."

The Church has therefore adopted a nonconfrontational posture vis-a-vis the government. It is working quietly behind the scenes to persuade and encourage the government in the direction of respect for human rights and adoption of

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moderate policies. But it is not publicly attacking the government. So far, he reflected, the government has been reasonably responsive to this policy. After a meeting between the Executive Council of Bishops and the three junta members two months ago, a liaison group was established to discuss and attempt to iron out problems between Church and State. Consisting of several bishops and a representative of each branch of service (General Villarreal, Secretary General at the Presidency, represents the Army), the group meets about once a month and has already defused several potentially serious matters.

The Nuncio said we must remember, too, that Argentina is not really a society; rather, it is a collection of individual sectors with little if any consensus among them. And to this collection was added, after World War II, some of the worst elements of European society, including many of the Nazis, anarchists and Communists. The military honestly wish to rectify this situation and to bring about a more integrated, cohesive society--though they may sometimes appear to be going about it in a mistaken way.

I asked the Nuncio as to the implications of all this for U. S. policy. How might the U. S. arrange itself to help promote human rights--without, of course, ignoring its other interests?

The Nuncio replied that we should work through such international agencies as the Red Cross, which would shortly be sending a mission to Argentina. We should also work through the UN and Inter-American Human Rights Commissions, especially the latter. He felt, too, that quiet diplomacy articulated within a bilateral context could be effective. "Keep a steady but softly-spoken pressure on the government," he suggested. A public condemnation of Argentina in the U. S. Congress--or on the part of any other official entity in the U. S.--on the other hand, would be disastrous, he declared. It would excite nationalist sentiment and strengthen the hardliners. It would, in short, have exactly the opposite effect to the one desired. It would harm, not help, the cause of human rights.

The Nuncio indicated the Church is pushing the government to take two initial steps: a) publish a list of those detained, and b) bring to justice some of those responsible for the worst excesses. He suggested the U. S., in its own bilateral representations, might concentrate on the same points. I assured him we were already doing so and indicated my personal belief that insofar as concerned parties were approaching the GOA on similar points, the combined effect would--hopefully--be magnified.

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